

“Margaritaville”--Jimmy Buffett (1977)

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Essay by Scott Atwell (guest post)*



Jimmy Buffett

He claims the song took just six minutes to write. He claims Elvis almost recorded it. He claims a woman is to blame.

In a career that has reached beyond a half century, Jimmy Buffett has over 350 songs to his credit, but one of them--this one--has defined his popularity as a lifestyle artist who inspires others to live vicariously through his travels.

While the Florida Keys are closely tied to his persona, it was the Texas music scene that kept Buffett buoyed in the 1970s, playing “every junior college in the entire state, including El Centro in downtown Dallas,” he joked on Jerry Jeff Walker’s Austin TV show. After working a 1976 show, Buffett was set to fly back to Florida and on the way out of town, stopped at a Mexican restaurant, where he ordered burritos and a margarita, the taste of which was extraordinarily satisfying at the time, if not inspiring.

In an interview with Michael Riedel, Buffett says he was visiting a woman he was dating, and “there was the potential for a breakup.” After a couple of margaritas and a few tears, she drove him to the airport and, at the gate, he got out his guitar and churned out the chorus for a new song. “I was going to call it ‘Wasting Away Again in Austin, Texasville,’” he said.

But then, Florida intervened. After landing in Miami, Buffett set out to drive to Key West via the Overseas Highway, which still featured a remnant of Henry Flagler’s railroad: an old-fashioned swing bridge on the Seven Mile Bridge that often got stuck in the open position, leaving automobiles backed up for miles. Stalled in traffic, Buffett pulled out his note pad and finished the song he had started in Austin.

The next night, Buffett was back in Key West and performed “Margaritaville” for the first time on stage at long-lost Logun’s Lobster House, where literary giants Truman Capote, novelist Dotson Rader and poet John Malcolm Brinnin were seated in the front row. By the end of the song, they were all singing, “Searchin’ for my lost shaker of salt,” he told the Riedel.

Buffett carried the song with him to his next studio session, the “Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes” album, which his new producer insisted be recorded near an ocean setting. At Miami’s Criteria Studios, Buffett pitched Norbert Putnam the story of a boozy, barefoot walk home that ended with a cut toe. Putnam recounted the moment on the Paul Leslie Hour radio program: “All great songs contain one ingredient,” Putnam explained, “some form of conflict. It can be between you and your girlfriend or worse. As Jimmy is describing this song, I’m hoping it has some conflict.”

As if Buffett had summoned the wisdom from a lifetime of reading literary classics, the song’s struggle appeared in the form of a lost shaker of salt. “He introduces conflict,” Putnam continued, “and then he takes all of the blame for it and claims humility. Then we have to give him a hug, you see? So, he covers all of the emotional bases. I just sat there and said this is one of the best-formed songs I’ve ever heard and I think history has proven that to be true.”

In a 2010 appearance on “CMT Crossroads” with the Zac Brown Band, Buffett confessed that Elvis Presley was on the verge of taking “Margaritaville” into the studio as his own. Perhaps Putnam, who had already worked with the King, was trying to double dip, but Buffett’s version would prove worthy enough on its own, making it to #1 on “Billboard’s” list of Hot Adult Contemporary Tracks and as high as #14 on their Hot 100. Putnam calls it one of the biggest hits in the history of the MCA catalog, with more than 30 million units sold. “Thank you, Mr. Buffett. He funded my retirement.”

As the legend of the song grew, one of the most important business decisions made by Buffett was to avoid fixing one location as the source of Margaritaville’s magic. “Whatever Margaritaville is, it’s an oasis for people from all walks of life,” he has said, “whatever’s going on in your life, to spend anywhere from three minutes or three months in a bit of escapism.” To extend the thought, if Margaritaville could be “anywhere” then it might be found “everywhere,” and today the brand has taken on a life of its own in the form of hotels, retirement developments, casinos, restaurants and bars, RV parks, Sirius Satellite Radio channels, Internet TV sites, Broadway musicals and even kitchen appliances. Home-shopping behemoths HSN and to boast more than 400 Margaritaville-branded items.

As a legal matter, the key to Buffett’s use of the song title grew out of a 1983 lawsuit which followed his attempt to open a Key West store called Margaritaville. “I discovered the Chi Chi’s Restaurant chain had copyrighted the word Margaritaville,” he explained to reporter Ken Ringle. “I had to reach a settlement with Chi Chi’s to use the name of a song I’d written! Then I found a woman in Hawaii had copyrighted ‘Cheeseburger in Paradise’! I was being ripped off everywhere because I wasn’t paying attention. There was a demand there, and everyone was exploiting it but me! So I started taking care of business.”

Today, Margaritaville Holdings includes four booming divisions: lodging, alcohol, licensing and media. The company’s specialty is licensing the Margaritaville name, guaranteeing revenue without taking on a financial risk. For franchisees, use of the brand appears to be worth the hefty fee. “Variety,” in 2018, reported the Margaritaville name was bringing in upwards of \$2 billion annually. Buffett biographer Ryan White can summon only one analogy when describing the reach of the franchise: It’s as big as “Star Wars.”

As a fitting footnote, the 2021 Florida Legislature approved a Margaritaville vehicle license tag for car owners. If they only knew the song was literally completed... on the road.

Scott Atwell was born and raised in Key West, Florida, where he is fiercely proud of his hometown, and people who sing about it. While hosting an all-Jimmy Buffett radio program, he authored "Buffett Backstories: Fifty Years, Fifty Songs" from which this essay was adapted.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.